



## Book Review: Learning and Rebuilding a Shattered Force— Memoirs of Pre-Yom Kippur War Egyptian Generals, 1967-1972

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 3 (March 2005)

by [LCDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, MSC, USN](#)

*Strategic Insights* is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click [here](#).

### Introduction

Dr. Mohammed Al-Jawadi has made a major contribution to the understanding of the strategic and tactical thinking of Egyptian generals. His famous Arabic work, *Al Nasr Al- Waheed (The Only Victory)* which collects the memoirs of five Egyptian generals who planned and fought the 1973 Yom-Kippur War, was published in 2000.

His 2001 volume, *Fee Eikaab Al-Naksah, Muzakiraat Qaadah Misr Al-Askariyah Sabaa wa Siteen ila Ithnain wa Sabaaen (In Between the Catastrophe, Memoirs of Egyptian Military Commanders from 1967 to 1972)*, (Cairo: Dar-Al-Khiyal Press, 2001, 555 pages)) features the memoirs of five Egyptian generals who were involved in the reconstruction of the Egyptian military establishment after the 1967 Six-Day War.

The book offers Arab audiences insight into Egyptian strategic discussions and interactions between President Nasser and generals who occupied such posts as Head of Military Intelligence and Air Force Chief of Staff. One general, Mohammed Fawzy, who was implicated in a failed attempt to overthrow President Sadat in May 1971, is also featured in this book.

The Six-Day War was a traumatic experience on Egyptian military thinking and jolted the leadership in Cairo to seriously study and examine the Arab-Israeli Wars. This self-examination coupled with a healthy respect for the Israeli Defense Forces enabled the Egyptians to execute its initial successes in the 1973 Yom-Kippur War. Only since the decade of the 1990s have many Egyptian generals completed their memoirs in Arabic, and Dr. Mohammed Al-Jawadi has made their works accessible in volumes that include the 1973 war, and this volume on the 1967-1972 inter-war years.

Unlike Mohammed Hassanien Heikal whose volumes on the 1967 and 1973 wars have been translated in Arabic and who focuses on the political as well as the military, Al-Jawadi's focus is on the military strategic and tactical thoughts of Egyptian senior commanders. His work is worthy of careful analysis by students of the Middle East, as it provides insight into Arab military thought.

His book offers a purely Egyptian view of the frame of mind before the 1967 Six-Day War and the reconstruction of the Egyptian military in the aftermath of the 1967 War. It also gives readers insight into what military commanders were doing when war broke out on June 5, 1967. To continue your exploration of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I recommend Michael Oren's *The Six-Day War and the Making of the Modern Middle-East* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), Kenneth Pollack's *Arabs at War* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 2002) and the late Chaim Herzog's classic *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (London: Lionel Leventhal, 1982).

## **Air Marshal General Madkoor Aboul-Aez—Picking Up the Pieces of the Six-Day War**

Air Marshal Madkoor's Aboul-Aez served only 130 days (June 11, 1967-October 31 1967) as Chief of Egypt's Air Force after the June 1967 Six-Day War. Armed Forces Chief of Staff Field Marshal Mohammed Fawzy politely removed him from office for his outspoken manner and many within Egypt's Air Force call Aboul-Aez the father of modern Egyptian air strategy. Even his adversaries had to concede to his powerful arguments in a military that does not encourage questioning of doctrine and skepticism of strategic thought. General Aboul-Aez's career in military aviation started in 1937 from World War II to the 1952 Revolution that brought Nasser to power, he flew reconnaissance and logistics missions, and in 1954 he assumed command of the Egyptian Air Force Training School. He left the military in 1964 to become governor of Aswan in Upper Egypt and during the 1967 Six-Day War became head of Egypt's national airline, before being recalled to serve as Commander of Egypt's Air Force after the 1967 Six-Day War on June 11th.

Aboul-Aez writes about how Nasser summoned him to his home, giving him complete control over the Egyptian Air Force and talking him out of a proposal to transfer control of air defense to the Soviets. His description of what he took over in the aftermath of the 1967 War was akin to Admiral Chester Nimitz taking command of the Pacific Fleet after Pearl Harbor. The General attempted to warn senior military commanders to look to the 1956 Suez Crisis, in which the Egyptian Air Force was knocked out of the war by a similar surprise attack, as model for strategic planning.

In 1963, while acting as Deputy Air Chief, he debated over the need to invest in more airstrips, hardened air shelters and bases to disperse Egypt's jet fighters and bombers. His memoirs recount his argument of investing in airpower to defend Egyptian ground formations and naval assets from air attack. The Army won out against the Air Force and more divisions would be equipped and formed, even Naval Chief Admiral Suleiman Ezzat would get a destroyer that year—much to the consternation of Aboul-Aez and his argument to secure Egyptian airspace before investing in such military hardware. Eleven days before the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasser asked Aboul-Aez, then governor of Aswan Province, for his opinion of the Egyptian Air Force. The general candidly warned Nasser on several tactical issues why Egypt could not wait for an Israeli first strike, and that Nasser's saber rattling would lead to an Israeli response. Those issues he listed to the Egyptian leader were:

- Egypt will not be able to withstand a first aerial strike.
- Our fighters and bombers will be destroyed on the ground.
- Our airports are vulnerable and have no anti-air missile cover.
- Our planes are openly parked and not in hardened shelters.
- 1956 will happen again with an even more aggressive Israeli air strike and an even worse retreat of our forces in the Sinai.
- Our radars do not provide adequate early warning.
- Our ground forces are in need of training and restructuring.
- Advise not to go to war with Israel at this time.

Aboul-Aez had a similar conversation with Field Marshal Amer, the Chief of Egypt's Armed Forces four months before the Six-Day War.

### **General Aboul-Aez as Egyptian Air Force Chief**

Assuming the post of Egypt's supreme air commander, Aboul-Aez laid out maps and planned runways, shelters, airstrips, command, control and coordination areas. He forced his staff to study ways in which Egypt could retain control of her air assets and even exercise a second strike option, if they had to absorb an Israeli first strike. His mandate to run air defense without interference would be constantly challenged by Field Marshal Fawzy, the overall Commander of Egypt's Armed Forces.

The challenges would come over which officers to dismiss after the 1967 War and continue over funds to rebuild Egypt's armed forces. One intense inter-service dispute broke out in front of Nasser and involved the proposal to place the Egyptian Air Force under army control. Aboul-Aez is highly critical of Fawzy, whom he believes felt a sense of shame being Chief of Staff for Operations during the 1967 War. Aboul-Aez would win his argument over army control by rationalizing the expertise inherent in the air force to vector aircraft and maintain the sophisticated equipment. He criticizes military inspection teams sent to air bases and composed mainly of land forces officers with no flight or air force experience, and he argues that inspections became a chance for inter-service rivalry, and not fixing what was truly wrong in airfields and plane maintenance.

General Aboul-Aez claims in his memoirs that the supreme commander Field Marshal Fawzy used the Egyptian Air Force as a means to scapegoat the overall problems of the Egyptian armed forces and their humiliating defeat in 1967. The two senior officers would duel over this issue, with Aboul-Aez arguing that such finger-pointing was unconstructive and that Field Marshal Fawzy was Chief of Operations during the Six-Day War and his animosity towards the air force was fueled by guilt over his abandoning Ismailia and heading for Cairo at the first sign of Israeli forces appearing on the eastern side of the Suez Canal.

### **The Battle of Ras-el-Aesh**

General Aboul-Aez writes that this battle along the Suez Canal—from the cities of Port Said to Suez—was the proudest moment of his short career as Egypt's Air Chief. In early July 1967, General Ahmed Ismail, who controlled this sector, reported concentrated artillery attacks on Egyptian positions from Port Said to Suez. He ordered return fire, and requested that Egyptian fighter-bombers lay down suppressive fire on Israeli positions along the canal. Note that the Six-Day war was only two weeks old, and the massive Soviet airlift of arms enabled General Ismail to request an aerial strike option. This request would lead to clash between Field Marshal Fawzy and his Air Chief General Aboul-Aez.

Fawzy was concerned if he ordered an air strike it would escalate the conflict, the Egypt's National Security Group of which Aboul-Aez was voting member would consider the decision. The Egyptian Air Force Chief threatened to resign if he was not allowed to unleash his aerial strike force of MiG-17 and MiG-24 escorts to General Ismail's sector and expanded sorties along the Suez Canal. He is finally granted his wish and his memoirs do not indicate how many MiG jet fighters were involved, but that an air assault occurred in Israeli locations in the Sinai and the Suez Canal with a concentrated assault on El-Arish. The name of the air portion of this battle was A1-Radiah Al-Jauwi (Operation Air Response). The author claims the air strikes led to the Israelis requesting a cease-fire—and the rest of the memoirs focus Field Marshal Fawzy's reluctance to congratulate Aboul-Aez for an effective strike, in which Israeli papers called Egypt's Air General a war criminal and threatened to bomb his village according to the book. Western sources record that the Israelis downed seven Egyptian aircraft during this battle.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Egyptian Air Force made much of this battle because of what they endured in the Six-Day War; it was satisfying for Cairo to send up sorties to challenge Israeli air dominance and also threaten ground units. The Egyptians see the end of 1967 in which they devised commando raids in Israeli-occupied Sinai, sank the Israeli destroyer *INS Eilat*, and the strikes by the air force so soon after their crushing defeat as major morale boosters to both the public and military, although tactically it did not achieve any military objective.

General Aboul-Aez also discusses the reasons for the Egyptian Air Force's lack of offensive mindset at the time, which was due to the greater Cold War politics of the Soviets wanting some control over the MIG and Ilyushin fighters and bombers supplied to Egypt, so as not to directly incur a confrontation with the United States through Egyptian-Israeli antagonism.

### **Soviet Interference in Egyptian Leadership**

Although the Soviets provided the bulk of military hardware and advisors, Aboul-Aez writes with abject loathing about Moscow's interference in Egyptian military affairs. He feels more than his aggressive desire to rebuild Egypt's Air Force doctrinally and technologically; the Soviets were behind his removal as Egypt's Air Force Chief. Aboul-Aez fought forced retirements and dueling with Nasser on the removal of senior Egyptian Air Force officers whose families had ties with the nefarious Muslim Brotherhood (See July-August 2003 edition of *Military Review* for more on the Muslim Brotherhood). His arguments centered on the difficulty in training experienced wing commanders and pilots. Aboul-Aez lost many of these battles but that did not stop him for trying. What bothered him were Egyptian officers ingratiating themselves to Moscow, playing a dangerous game of offering to bring communism into the ranks in exchange for support for key positions within the Egyptian military hierarchy. Aboul-Aez's career succumbed to Soviet meddling and the assignment of a pro-Moscow officer to his post, and the tenacious general was quietly relieved in late October 1967.

General Aboul-Aez did leave an indelible impression on many Egyptian air commanders; aside from thinking offensively; he wanted Egyptians to think of airpower in all its forms helicopter lift, air logistics and transport support, not just offensive fighters and bombers. Aboul-Aez saw the potential of combined operations in an Egyptian context but was too politically incorrect and not subservient enough to satisfy the Egyptian military establishment. Having been head of Egypt's Air Force Academy (Sept 1954-May 1961) before becoming Deputy Air force Chief, he is proud to have graduated eleven classes in his tenure and imbued them with a sense of strategic thought vis-à-vis the application of airpower. Many of these young cadets would be involved in the 1973 Yom-Kippur War.

### **General Mohammed Sadek—Director of Military Intelligence**

General Mohammed Sadek began dictating his memoirs in the 1980s and 1990s; he took over as Director of Egyptian Military Intelligence eight months before the 1967 Six-Day War. He begins by saying it took him six months to understand the complex intelligence programs of his predecessor and that the men of Egyptian intelligence did their duty in the Six-Day War. He blames the Soviets and Egypt's Socialist Party for spreading rumors about the incompetence of Egyptian intelligence.

What is insightful is President Nasser's reliance on regular intelligence reports from his own military intelligence, political party informants and outside sources—primarily Soviet and Arab intelligence bureaus. Mentioned specifically was intelligence cooperation with fellow non-aligned nation India, that warned Egypt that an attack by the Israelis would occur June 4th or 5th. The Six-Day War started June 5th. The Indian intelligence was discussed with Nasser and his Commander-in-Chiefs on June 2, and compared with other sources. Sadek narrates in his memoirs that he presented to the commanders an assessment of the Israeli order of battle; it

indicated concentrations of mechanized forces along the Israeli roads leading towards Rafah, Abu Ageila, Kom Abu -Salim and Bir Sabaa. He claims that he provided Egypt's military leaders an assessment of how forces would approach the Sinai. Reading Sadek's memoir, we see an obsession of ground forces and little imagination as to the ability of an air assault that would render Egyptian armor useless in the desert. He also claims that the Egyptian General Staff were too engaged in political intrigue to focus on strategy, training, doctrine and tactics. This does fall in line with the nepotism that was rife under Field Marshal Amer.

In another report Sadek submitted to Nasser and the Egyptian General Staff was an assessment of Israeli reaction once Nasser ordered the withdrawal of United Nations Peacekeepers from the Sinai and the closure of the Tiran Strait. In both accounts Sadek's intelligence apparatus felt that Israel would be ready to respond to Egypt between May 28 and June 2, 1967.

Sadek writes that Supreme Egyptian Commander Field Marshal Amer<sup>[2]</sup>, Minister of War Shams Badran and Chief of Staff for Operations General Mohammed Fawzy dismissed Egyptian sources of intelligence, relying blindly on mainly Soviet information. When the Soviets provided information on Israeli troop formations massing along Syria's border, Egypt sent Chief of Staff General Fawzy to the Golan Front and he reported that no Israelis were to be seen—but took on faith the information Moscow provided. Sadek activated Palestinian guerrilla cells to reconnoiter the Syrian-Israeli border and those elements reported no Israeli activity, which he dutifully submitted to the chain of command that decided to rely on the Soviet information. It is useful to remember that Syria was going through internal turmoil with Communist elements on the verge of overtaking the Baathists, a crisis created by Moscow that could tip the balance in favor of Syrian communist officers. But such a rationale does not appear part of the discourse of the Egyptian high command.

Sadek also provides harsh criticism of Field Marshal Amer's plan to flood the Sinai with a massive force of Egyptian active and reserve units upon the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping force. He cites as unforgivable the bussing of thousands of reserves pell-mell in civilian clothes without weapons, water, supplies or even water to the Sinai. Soviet T-34 and T-54 tanks along with Sherman tanks were sent with inadequate fuel and rounds. Whole infantry formations were dropped off in the Sinai without maps and orders causing them to become a humanitarian crisis. Amer and Nasser both felt that by sending a massive amount of forces would scare the Israelis and create a massive feint that would drive Tel-Aviv towards a course of action. Sadek believes it was incredible that such formations were used as front line units, and argued that if they succumbed to mass slaughter it would demoralize rear echelon regular formations.

### **Sadek's Recollections on War Minister Shams Badran and the Egyptian Air Force**

Minister of War Shams Badran did not have the level of access or confidence enjoyed by Field Marshal Amer, who was with Nasser during the 1952 revolution and was considered a close friend of the Egyptian president. Sadek articulates that Shams Badran's obsession was guaranteeing a military that was loyal to the regime, and he often felt guaranteeing this loyalty was more important than military expertise. Sadek disagreed with this outlook, and felt that Egypt was sacrificing its human resources in an electronic age of warfare, when expertise counted most.

Other problems Sadek highlights in the pre-1967 Egyptian military include the fact the Soviets did not provide Egypt SAM air defense systems until after the Six-Day War. He also criticizes the condition of the Egyptian Air Force, saying that the nation had inadequate fighters, pilots, airfields and weapons to arm planes. In 1966, the Egyptian Air Force engaged Israeli jets, the first time it involved Egyptian pilots, and the second incident fighters were piloted by Soviets—and both times Egypt lost planes in the air. This was an indicator of the inherent problems of not only the quality of Egyptian pilots, but also cast doubts on Soviet hardware and training.

## **Sadek's Discussions of Egyptian Intelligence Failures**

Perhaps the most important part of General Sadek's memoirs is his honest evaluation of the collection effort and use of intelligence by Egypt's General Staff and President Nasser before the 1967 Six-Day War. Among the failures he admits to:

- Land reconnaissance of Southern Israel, Gaza and the Negev Desert was under Army control and information was both lacking and not shared with the main Department of Military Intelligence (DM1) that Sadek headed.
- Information collected from reconnaissance posts in Gaza was not processed and absorbed efficiently; it would have revealed the pace of Israeli Air Force airstrip construction in Southern Israel.
- The Egyptian Air Force conducted only two aerial reconnaissance missions before June 1967, one flight reported activities of the Israeli port of Eilat when in actuality Sadek writes they had flown over the Jordanian port of Aqaba. Three days before the Israeli air attack, on June 2, Sadek and the Egyptian military commanders and President Nasser met to discuss Israeli troop concentrations on the road leading to Abu Ageila, Raffia and El-Arish in Egyptian controlled territory in the Sinai and Gaza Strip. Their discussions involved the ability of Egypt to absorb a first aerial strike by Israel and Sadek proposed moving a few jet fighters from the Sinai airbases in Egypt like Beth Suez Airbase. Air Commander Sidqui Mahmoud refused, arguing that it would demoralize air crews and make it appear like a withdrawal. According to Sadek, Nasser ended the evening of June 2nd convinced that Israel would not risk political damage with the United States by conducting a first strike.

Sadek also reveals information about the controversial intelligence provided by the Soviets that claimed Israeli troop concentrations on the Israeli border with Syria. Among Egyptian military historians, the validity of the Soviet reports is debated. Sadek believes the Soviets provided false intelligence to force a confrontation between Damascus and Tel Aviv so that members of Syria's Communist Party gained control of the government from the Baathists. The Egyptians' sending General Mohammed Fawzy to the Syrian front supports his thesis, as Fawzy reported no activity.

The Egyptian General Staff expressed frustration that they could not conduct aerial reconnaissance of the Golan Heights because they lacked the technical capability. Sadek activated Palestinian cells to reconnoiter the Syrian-Israeli border; they penetrated deep into Northern Israel and reported no activity. Sadek also laments that Chief of the Armed Forces Field Marshal Amer, and War Minister Shams Badran, refused Egyptian intelligence sources and accepted only outside assessments like the Soviets', despite Sadek's warning of false intelligence and the need to verify accuracy.

Sadek finds it odd they accepted Soviet intelligence and weapons but when it came to fighting the communization of the Egyptian officer corps, War Minister Badran ensured pro-Soviet Egyptian officers were transferred to the front. Sadek also reveals how War Minister Shams Badran consistently preached the need to ensure the loyalty of Egypt's armed forces before developing expertise in combat arms; the Egyptian head of military intelligence felt that many capable Egyptians who would've fought to defend Egyptian sovereignty were cast aside and he felt this was a huge mistake in an age of advanced electronic and technological warfare that Egypt was scarcely equipped to fight.

## **Sadek on the Greatest Crime of the Six-Day War**

General Sadek offers a scathing indictment of the Egyptian military leadership among his most critical descriptions:



- Sending reserve troops in civilian clothes, without weapons or even adequate water into the Sinai in an elaborate effort to display an Egyptian mass of force upon the withdrawal of United Nations peacekeepers from the Sinai. Sadek felt that once these poor souls were run over—and they would retreat in mass—it would cause panic among second echelon regular troops and cause a rout. Sadek's assessment was partially true, as a massive and disorganized retreat in the 1967 War would burn in the psyche of the Egyptian military until the 1973 War.
- Soviet T-34 and T-54 tanks along with Shermans were sent into the Sinai with inadequate fuel and tank rounds.
- Whole infantry units were sent without maps or orders as well as inadequate rations; they all became not front line fighters according to Sadek, but a humanitarian crisis. He recounts how a complete class of recently graduated military cadets was sent to the Sinai, where they were completely wiped out.

General Gamassy, who would later become Head of Operations during the 1973 War, writes that military warehouses were established in the Sinai but no thought was given to developing a regular pipeline of supply from these storage facilities to front line units in the Sinai.

General Sadek then turns his attention to the chaotic withdrawal of these forces, and how if it were planned in advance these forces could have withdrawn and regrouped at the Gidi and Mitla passes and mountainous regions of the Sinai. From there they could have mounted a stubborn defense against advancing Israeli ground units, with the object of defending the Suez Canal. Instead lacking orders or leadership, troops wandered the desert and were chewed up by the Israeli Air Force, and Sadek says that over 5,000 Egyptians were captured by the Israelis. In an incredible phone exchange between Field Marshal Amer and Sadek, the Egyptian supreme commander asks Sadek if it's too late to change his mind about the withdrawal order, and he responds: "It's over."

## **General Sidqui Mabmoud—Egyptian Air Marshal of the 1967 War**

The most tragic Egyptian figure of the 1967 War is Air Force Chief Sidqui Mahmoud who warned of a repeat attack of Egyptian airfields like the 1956 Suez War and argued that in ten years of military spending, only 17 million Egyptian pounds—approximately \$45 million—were spent on air defense. During senior National Military Council meetings decisions were not passed to unit commanders in the field, navy and airbases. He cites the May 14, 1967 parade in which units went through Cairo thinking it was a parade only to march off that very day unprepared to the Sinai. General Sidqui submitted a report to Nasser late in 1966, warning him and Field Marshal Amer that the air force would not be ready until 1970. In April 1966 while on his way to Damascus, he asked his pilot to fly over Jordan and the Golan Heights to confirm Soviet intelligence of Israeli troop concentrations, and there were none. Among Sidqui's strategies proposed in 1966 and rejected by the Syrians, Nasser and Field Marshal Amer:

- Developing strategies to draw the Israeli Air Force into engaging Egypt to facilitate a Syrian advance.
- Stationing two Egyptian fighter wings in Syria would have the benefit of supporting an Arab state and dispersing Egyptian aircraft.
- Station Egyptian air ground controllers in Syria.

General Sidqui discusses how the Egyptian leadership was drunk from the political victory of the 1956 Suez War, and failed to study or heed the military and strategic warnings of the campaign. It included a surprise Israeli air raid, paratroop landings on the Canal Zone by Anglo-French forces, and an Israeli armored advance through known points in the Sinai.

On May 23, 1967, Nasser calls a meeting at Abu Suweir Airbase and there announces the closure of the Tiran Straits, effectively blockading the Israeli port of Eilat. This was followed by an extraordinary four-hour discussion with the bulk of Egypt's air force officers. Sidqui was present and narrates a story of how a brave air force captain asks Nasser honest questions about an Israeli first strike; Nasser insisted that he wanted a political solution and that the Israelis would not attack first so long as his envoy Abdel-Zacharia Moheiddine was in Washington negotiating a political settlement.

Sidqui spoke with Nasser privately and told him that blockading the Tiran Strait has escalated the situation and it would be prudent to prepare an order for a first strike on the Israeli port town of Eilat and a surprise attack of ground forces into Southern Israel. Nasser refused to consider that option, and stressed a political solution would be found, basing his experience on the 1956 War.

The two men then toured the airbase and the air chief explained the fighters and bomber types that would later lie in ruins within two weeks. Sidqui tells Nasser on the tarmac that certain planes need to be forward based in the Sinai to undertake a strategic deep strike within Israel, and he told the President that there was an extreme shortage of bases, airstrips and equipment needed to disperse and sustain aircraft in the Sinai. Apparently Sidqui's discussion had an impact, for that evening he received a call from Field Marshal Amer authorizing Sidqui to work with agricultural minister Shafeeq Al-Khishin to develop ways to fortify airfields, landing strips and bases using sand barriers. It was a useless solution to a problem of not investing adequately in air defense for over ten years.

### **Sidqui's Discussions with Nasser Three Days Before the 1967 War**

On June 2nd, Nasser tells Sidqui he expects an Israeli attack sometime after June 5th. Sidqui presses Nasser to order a first strike, but he refuses to commit and the evening of June 2nd he joins Head of Intelligence General Sadek, Supreme Commander Field Marshal Amer, War Minister Badran, Deputy Chief of Operations Anwar Qadi, Head of Operations, Chief of Staff Mohammed Fawzy and Nasser for an emergency session. The fruits of the discussion are recounted by Sidqui as follows:

- Nasser obsesses on an Iraqi expeditionary force arriving in Jordan; he is told they would not be in Jordanian territory for another 72 hours.
- Nasser tells his generals that if the 5th of June passes without incident, then a political solution would be found. He then proposes that the Israelis undertake a minor strike to elicit an Egyptian response. Here he is mirror-imaging; this is an Arab tactic and shows Nasser's complete misreading of the Israeli central strategy of a swift and decisive blow that can be sustained by their population size and economy.
- Nasser then tells them that the Israelis could conduct a surgical strike on the Suez refinery, the largest in the Canal Zone. Sidqui tells the generals and the president, that he must order his air force to strike at Eilat now. His army commanders advised that they withdraw artillery units from their expeditionary forces in Yemen to reinforce the Sinai and Gaza strip.
- Nasser dismisses this talk and places his hopes on Zacharia Moheiddine's efforts to negotiate a political settlement with Israel through the United States.
- Sidqui then has a heated exchange with Nasser pleading that he order a first strike. Supreme Commander Amer calms both men down, siding with Nasser and saying to Sidqui if Egypt were to conduct a first strike, the President feels it would be the US and not Israel that Egypt would fight.
- Hasanein Heikal, a confidant of Nasser, asks Sidqui if Egypt could absorb an Israeli first strike. The Air Commander responds that an IAF first strike would be deadly and he says the word twice for emphasis.



**State of the Egyptian Military Leaders on June 5 th, 1967—Day One of the Six-Day War**

On the first day of the 1967 Six-Day War (June 5th), Sidqui was ordered to prepare an executive plane to take War Minsiter Badran, Field Marshal Amer and his entourage to inspect defenses in the Sinai. Sidqui would join the delegation and senior Syrian and Iraqi officers would join them. The senior Egyptian military leadership was resigned to Nasser's insistence a political solution would be found, and took lightly his warning of an attack on or after June 5th. Sidqui assumed since he was preparing these planes, that this indicated war would not break out this day.

The plane left at 0830 from Al-Maza Airfield in Cairo and in addition to the War Minister, Field Marshal Amer and Air Chief Sidqui, on the plane was General Anwar Qadi (Senior military operations officer), and Colonel Mohammed Ayoub (aide to Field Marshal Amer). None of these senior officers discussed the fact this was the date Nasser had warned about in their previous meetings. While on the plane, they read of high-levels of radar jamming activity and a report of increased Israeli Air Force activity on bases in Southern Israel. The pilots got word first that Kibreet and and Abu Suweir airbases were under attack, and they decided to return to Cairo immediately. While crossing the Suez Canal Zone Amer's plane was surrounded by Israeli fighter jets, the senior officers looked at their windows muttering, "Impossible! Impossible!" Amer's aide, thinking this was a coup attempt, pulls out his pistol and the other generals all go for their guns. Air force General Sidqui yells at them, "Put down your weapons, you fools, Israel is attacking us now!" They fly over Inchas airfield in Cairo, seeing it in flames, and they finally land at Cairo's civilian airport, as the military section is in ruins. Sidqui claims that War Minister Badran read an encoded cable from the Ajloon station in Jordan, which read, "ISRAELI PLANES OVER EGYPTIAN AIRBASES AT 0745 (Cairo Time)," and another cable "50 ISRAELI PLANES WILL ATTACK EGYPT BETWEEN 0835-0845 (Amman Time)."

The cables would be a source of controversy in the aftermath, when it was discovered that if the message were delivered properly; and if Amer was not with his mistress and not to be disturbed; along with Minister Badran, whose aides did not awake him; he would've gotten 30 minutes advanced warning of the attack. A monitoring station at Ajloon, Jordan picked up the formation of Israeli jets heading south, and immediately notified Egyptian General Abdel-Moniem Riad, who cabled Cairo; but the cipher had been reset, and Cairo had not been given the new code. He then tried to route the message on short-wave through Algiers, Algeria.

Egypt's senior military leadership got to the command center at Nasr City by taxi amid chaos, panic and burning airfields and military positions. Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Mohammed Fawzy had ordered that anti-air guns stand down and ammunition be locked up as Field Marshal Amer and War Minister Badran would be airborne that morning; and this would be throughout Egypt and the Sinai. It was a fatal mistake, and one not uncommon in regimes that ruled autocratically and did not fully trust their military. Amer screamed at his Air Chief Sidqui, "Execute the plan!"—forgetting that the plan was an Egyptian first strike option that Sidqui had presented 72 hours earlier.

General Sidqui coordinated token air resistance, and with the Egyptian Air Force at 20 percent effectiveness, what remained of MiG-15s and IL-28s were sent on suicidal engagements with Israeli jet fighters. Formations of Illyushin-28 bombers returning from Yemen were sent to the Sinai on strafing runs against Israeli columns. The Air Commander writes that Egyptian engineering crews repaired runways knowing that planes sent needed to have a place to land, and they did it under fire and while fighting the heat and explosions around them. Algeria dispatched twelve MiG-21s to provide Egypt with air cover, but Sidqui—assessing they had no place to land—refused to accept them. Sidqui breaks down the number of sorties sent against Israeli units as follows [\[Table 1\]](#):

<b>Table 1: Sorties Sent Against Israel</b>
---

June 5th	22
June 6th	49
June 7th	20
June 8th	22
June 9th	02

General Sidqui lamented at Egypt's eleven airbases, of which only four were functional and all lacked hardened shelters. He compares this with 58 airfields the Israelis had before the start of the Six-Day War. After-action reports showed the signals officer who received the Jordanian warning, LTCOL Musaid Al-Junaidy, went home and left his post after hearing of Nasser sending an envoy to Washington; he delegated a signals sergeant to deliver the message that arrived at dawn to War Minister Badran, whose guards refused to wake him, and relented, taking the warning and setting it next to his dresser beside his bed while he slept.

### **Sidqui's Punishment**

Mahmoud Sidqui would be offered a posting as Egypt's attaché in London, but he refused and remained to be taken to court and blamed for the 1967 debacle. The man who advocated the first strike, who argued about Egypt's shortcomings in air defense, and warned of repeat tactics seen in the 1956 Suez War, was given a 25 year sentence—of which he served two and half years. When President Sadat looked to his Air Chief of Staff Hosni Mubarak after the 1973 Yom-Kippur War and asked what can offer to the victor, he replied: "Free Sidqui Mahamoud."

### **General Mohammed Fawzy—Armed Forces Chief of Staff**

General Mohammed Fawzy is one of the more interesting characters of the 1967 Six-Day War and the years following. Air Marshal Sidqui Mabmoud blamed him above any other person for the 1967 failures. Yet he remained, and would become Egypt's Supreme Commander, replacing Field Marshal Amer who committed suicide shortly after the 1967 War. He is perhaps described as the epitome of the political officer that plagued many Arab armies. In May 1971, he attempted a coup against Sadat that failed, and which ended with his imprisonment. Yet his memoirs offer another strategic view of Egyptian military thinking prior to 1967, when he served Nasser and Field Marshal Amer as Chief of Staff, during the rebuilding of the shattered Egyptian military.

He begins by explaining how Soviet tactics subjected Egyptians to mind-numbing routine, and that the Egyptian General Staff concluded after the Six-Day War that there was a need to focus on securing air supremacy in Egypt and along the canal before mounting an offensive against Israel. They would have no choice but to absorb Soviet technology, which came in the form of MiG-17, 21 and Sukhoi-7 jet fighters and bombers.<sup>[3]</sup> Fawzy writes, however, of a meticulous study done jointly by Cairo and Moscow that discusses lessons from the 1967 air war against American-equipped Israeli pilots, and comparing them to engagements in Syria, juxtaposing Vietnamese air tactics against the F-4 Phantom. Soviet and Egyptian engineers and military commanders used their results to redesign and modify Soviet MiG and Sukhoi jets.

Throughout 1969, the Soviets and Egyptians studied tactics for air defense and artillery suppression fire to establish a bridgehead along the Suez Canal. Egyptians began to consume Soviet satellite imagery intelligence. Soviet Tupolev-16 long-range reconnaissance planes crewed by Soviets flew over the Sinai and along the Red Sea, providing Egyptians their first attempt at seriously analyzing terrain and Israeli positions.

Nasser was shown a new modified MiG-21; armor was increased, extra fuel tanks added as were pods for bombs. The Egyptians wanted a low-ground close air support combat fighter for their

plans to retake the Sinai. Reading Fawzy's account, one cannot help but recollect how our own A-1 Thunderbolt was born in the eighties. The Egyptians modified the MiG, adding a 2,500-pound heavy machine gun that fired 60 rpm. The Egyptians began a meticulous study of airpower for the first time, studying imagery and planning tactics such as striking at Israeli centers and landing in Syria. Fuel versus arms mix was analyzed. On July 20, 1969 the Egyptians sent a wing of modified MiG-21s to tangle with Israeli Mirage jets; they briefed Nasser of the results of one Mirage shot down. By the end of 1969, Fawzy could report to Nasser that by June 1970, they would achieve sufficient air supremacy to move the war of attrition to an offensive war.

The problem would be not aircraft, but training enough pilots and crews—estimating they needed 300 pilots by the summer of 1970 to achieve Egyptian tactical goals. Egyptians concluded that the F-4 Skyhawk outclassed the MiG-21 in altitudes above seven kilometers but were matched at less than seven kilometers. In August 1969, the Egyptians received a massive infusion of Soviet armor, and mechanized vehicles, artillery and SAM Missiles. This was used to begin training, modernizing and equipping the Egyptian Second and Third Armies. 1969 ended with a five-step blueprint that would evolve into the 1973 Yom-Kippur War.

### **Fawzy's Punishment**

Fawzy's memoirs end with a discussion of the 1971 attempted coup against Sadat. He would spend 980 days in prison before being pardoned by Sadat shortly after the 1973 War. His decision to bring the coup stemmed from a combination of frustration with Sadat in putting off the final decision to go to war with Israel, and perceived sleights he endured by the Egyptian President in front of his generals. His last act was to help negotiate a deal he would see from his prison cell in 1972—the final massive Soviet infusion of military hardware that arrived in Egypt, and which consisted of additional armor, artillery as well as electronic command and control equipment and a squadron of the Soviets' latest combat fighter, the MiG-25.

### **General Salah Al-Hadidi—Lawyer, Judge and Inquisitor**

The shortest and perhaps most unique memoir in this collection is that of General Al-Hadidi, who was charged with convening the courts of inquiry that led to the 1967 debacle. What is revealing is how he was able to dig up a conversation between Nasser and Air Marshal Sidqui in which the Air Commander tells Nasser that if Israel attacked Egypt, his forces could sustain 20 percent loss and retaliate with 80 percent of the remaining air force. This does not settle with accounts from the other generals, and explain Mubarak's own willingness to request amnesty for Sidqui.

His investigation did reveal the scandal of the warning message sent from Jordan, implicating the signals officer and sergeant. Another item that came from his investigation was a visit by Nasser to the Sinai front, in which he insisted Egyptian troops and Palestinian guerrillas fight side-by-side in Gaza. This frustrated plans for the Palestinians to be used as front line troops with the regular Egyptian army as a second and third echelon in the Gaza theatre of operations. Such meddling, argued General Al-Hadidi, was counter to good order and eroded command relationships on the Gaza front. He also found a witness who backs up Sidqui's claim of a lack of expenditures on the air force, and who testifies that in one year the Air Force asked for an allotment of 1.5 Egyptian million pounds (\$5 million) and got only 25,000 Egyptian pounds (\$70,000). This was damning to the testimony of Air Marshal Sidqui, which asserted that Egypt could absorb a first strike.

Al-Hadidi's court disposed of hundreds of officers, passing out long sentences, exonerating a few, and passing out death penalties to some. His court would restructure the Egyptian armed forces by bringing a new crop of leaders to the forefront, like General Ismail Ali, Abdel-Ghanny Al-Ganimassy, and Saad Al-Din Al-Shazly, to name a few who would undertake some brilliant tactics in the execution and planning of the 1973 War.

## Conclusion

Al-Jawadi's 2001 volume brings together the memoirs of another five Egyptian generals, and makes a major contribution to the understanding of Arab strategic thought for specialists wanting to gain insight into the infamous 1973 Yom-Kippur War—which was planned in stages from 1967, and underwent trial and error throughout the War of Attrition (1967-1970). It offers a glimpse of how Egyptian senior officers reconstructed the Egyptian military after their crushing defeat. As U.S. forces continue their involvement in the Middle East, it is vital to gain insight into what Arab military leaders are reading—and how they view the formulation of strategy through different periods of their modern history.

Just as we correctly studied Soviet doctrine, and translated the writings of Russian Marshals as well as Vietnamese tomes on tactics during the Cold War, today's war demands an understanding of Arab military thought, which can be adapted to urban settings and used in conjunction with terror tactics. The Arabic language should not be a barrier to this process.

## About the Author

LCDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, MSC, USN is a Middle East Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has been working for several years to bring Arabic works of military interest to the pages of the *U.S. Army Journal Military Review*, and he is co-author of "Islamic Rulings on Warfare," published by the Army War College Strategic Studies Institute.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe". There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. See the section on the War of Attrition authored by David Wurmser in Bernard Reich, ed., *An Historical Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 565-568.
2. Abdel-Hakim Amer was perhaps Nasser's closest friend; they were part of the 1952 coup that toppled the Egyptian monarchy, and in 1958 Amer was made Minister of War and promoted Field Marshal. In 1959, he was made pro-consul of Syria during the short union called the United Arab Republic. Amer's heavy-handed treatment of Syrian officers led to a 1961 Damascus coup. Upon his return, he was kept his portfolio as supreme commander of Egypt's armed forces, and was given the additional responsibilities of being on the Executive Committee for the National Union and Chairman of the Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism. He was implicated in an attempted coup after the 1967 Six-day War, and committed suicide after this attempt to regain control of the army failed.
3. For a short discussion of the types of MiG's used in the Arab-Israeli conflict, see Bernard Reich (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 345-348.

